

HAND TACO TUESDAY



Navy photo by PH3 Jonathan Chandler

By AN Justin Henderson

I woke up that Tuesday evening, expecting a normal night at work. A few hours later, I had a safety incident that almost crushed my right hand.

When I got to the shop, I began my typical airman duties: Pre-op some SE gear, carry some toolboxes, hold the flashlight...you know...nothing out of the ordinary. My PO3 then received a phone call from the AOs. They needed some help dropping a 480-gallon tank for inspection. “No big deal,” I thought. “I’ve dropped plenty of tanks.” I didn’t realize at the time how terrible those words sound, even though other maintainers have said them in the past with bad results.

We arrived at the jet in hangar bay No. 2 and found four ordies already there. We had everything needed for the job: a speed-handle, the proper 7/16-inch socket to unlock the BRU, four people—including me—to assist

lowering the tank, and an AO1 CDI to drop the tank. We were all set, or so it appeared.

An empty external drop-tank dolly sat on the other side of the jet, between a pallet-jack and some other equipment. Two tractors blocked direct access to the dolly, so we couldn’t get to it as quickly as we would have liked. And it was required for this job.

The tank was dry-hung, meaning it was connected to the wing, but the fuel line was not attached or feeding fuel into the tank. The inspection was a quick job for the AOs, and we had the resources and time to move the gear to get that dolly. However, everyone wanted to get the job done, so we decided to do a manual drop. That means two people carry the forward end of the tank, and two people carry the aft end. One person then unlocks and drops the tank.

Although these photos show an EA-6B, the dip test is valid for all drop-tanks.



"Thump tests" don't work, and you can't always believe gauges. Dip the tank before you try to drop it.



After dipping the tank to make sure it's empty, be sure the people at both ends of the tank are ready before you release it.



If the man releasing the tank from the bomb rack doesn't dip the tank first, the Sailors at both ends are going to be holding roughly 2,000 pounds of thump-tested grief.

We took up our positions, and I asked the AD3, "Hey, is there any fuel in this tank?" He in turn asked the AOs. After a couple of headshakes, we were ready to drop the tank. It was at that point when I seriously should have considered the gravity (pun intended) of the whole situation and applied some ORM.

AO1 called, "Ready in the back, ready in the front, here comes the weight!" I next heard the telltale click that I'll never forget. The tank became solid, dead weight. We all lost our grip, and the tank fell to the ground with a wet thud. The tank still had about 200 pounds of fuel inside. We had another problem...my right hand was sandwiched between the non-skid and the bottom of the tank.

At that point, everyone in the hangar bay knew it, too, because I let out a long, horrifying howl. Panicked and in pain, I jerked my hand free of the sandwich that just had turned my hand into a taco. My hand already was swelling, and sharp, knife-like pains tore through my arm. I could feel my bones burning white-hot. As the people around me came to help, I literally was seeing stars.

We all shook off the mistake, secured the tank, and went back to the shop. My hand still was throbbing, though, and I no longer was able to make a fist. The supervisor sent me to medical for an exam.

This simple mistake caused two fractures and a broken piece of bone in my wrist. I now am on light and limited-duty for four to six weeks, with possible surgery in my future. To make matters worse, I increased the workload on my shipmates because our shop now is down a man.

Situations like this happen too often, and it almost always is because of perceived pressure that makes us work to get a job done too quickly. In this case, we really had the time but pushed anyway. Maintainers always have two options: the right way and the wrong way. In this case, we should have asked an ABH to move the tractors for five minutes so we could have gotten the dolly and dropped the tank correctly. It was that simple.

We had the tools and the resources, but we didn't have the required patience. We also didn't practice good ORM. At times like this, someone needs to step up and say, "This situation isn't right" or "Maybe we should try something else" or simply, "This isn't safe, I'm not doing it." Nobody is going to think any lesser of you for doing a job the right way. ✈

Airman Henderson works in the mech shop at VFA-27.

A couple other things would have helped: the book, checklist and more importantly, not doing a thump test. Mech has said it 237 times since 1961, the first year Mech came out, a thump test doesn't work...period. Pop the cap, do a dip check, and stop injuring maintainers.—Ed.